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PROGRAM The Today Show STATION WRC-TV NBC Network

DATE June 12, 1986 8:30 A.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT White House Reaction to Noriega Charges

BOB JAMIESON: NBC News chief diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb reports that Panama's army chief, Manuel Noriega, has been accused by U.S. intelligence officials of deep involvement in drug traffic, money-laundering and gun-running in Latin America. The charges are likely to be an embarrassment for the Reagan Administration.

White House correspondent Andrea Mitchell is standing by with more.

ANDREA MITCHELL: Bob, no one here is denying the charges that Noriega has been involved in these alleged illegal activities, but the White House wants to downplay the problem as much as possible. Officials here concede that they need a strongman in Panama; and for better or for worse, Noriega is it.

Now, while they would prefer to see a democracy develop there similar to what they think has developed in Costa Rica and in El Salvador, they don't see any sign of that happening.

Contrary to one report that National Security Adviser John Poindexter specifically warned Noriega to cut out his alleged illegal activities, one senior official here told me that what Poindexter actually did was spend one-half hour with Noriega at the airport in Panama when Poindexter was wrapping up a tour of the U.S. military command there. So, on departure, he sat down with Noriega for simply a half-hour and told him that the United States would like to see him play a more positive role, but that there was no mention of any of his alleged illegal activities.

So, it seems very clear here that they are going to try

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to downplay the problem. And for better or for worse, they think that they are stuck with Noriega because he is a strongman in an area where they think they need a strong military presence.

JAMIESON: Andrea, among the charges circulating today is that Noriega was dealing intelligence information both to Cuba and the United States. Has there been any reaction there to that?

MITCHELL: They're obviously most concerned about that and his support, his alleged support for leftist rebels, such as the M-19 in Colombia. But they say that he is a military strongman. There's no sign of the democratic institutions developing, even with the new president, in Panama. So they're going to have to live with this. And they're hoping to downplay it by having the State Department respond, and keeping the White House out of it.

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